

Equine CranioSacral Therapy: Keep the Equine Body in Balance with a Light Touch

by Maureen Rogers



The horse is a natural athlete, and whether a competition horse of world caliber or a backyard pet, he can benefit from Equine CranioSacral Therapy. Photo by Nancy McCurdy, www.nancymccurdyphotography.com

Newly adapted to the equine world in the last decade, CranioSacral therapy is a uniquely efficient way to keep horses in biomechanical balance and maintain skeletal and muscular health. CranioSacral therapy is also used successfully in treating specific equine conditions such as headshaking, TMJ (temporomandibular joint) imbalances, head traumas and facial nerve paralysis.

CranioSacral therapy is highly effective in treating both acute and chronic injuries. What makes this therapy unique is its specific focus on *the equine skull and its relationship to the rest of the body*.

Core Link

Originally known as craniosteopathy and craniopathy, CranioSacral evolved from the practice of osteopathy. In the early 1900s, Dr. William Sutherland, an osteopath, discovered that the bones of the cranium connect to the sacrum through what he referred to as the “core link”. The core link is made up of the skull or cranium, the spinal cord, the dura mata (the protective sleeve around the spinal cord) and the sacrum. Sutherland noticed that when “pressures” were applied to the various bones of the skull, the sacrum and pelvis were affected. The same principle applies when it comes to the sacrum and pelvis; eventually, pressures applied there would affect the bones of the skull.

These structures are connected, not only by muscles, fascia, liga-

ments and tendons on the outside, but, MORE importantly, by the tissues from inside the core link. While traditional osteopathy focuses on the bones themselves, CranioSacral focuses on bringing balance throughout the skeletal and muscular systems with specific focus on the intricate connection of the individual bones of the skull, the spine and the sacrum.

Application of CranioSacral Therapy

Equine CranioSacral practitioners apply specific hands-on techniques to the horse’s body to release restrictions in the musculoskeletal system and in the fascia, a tissue that weaves the whole body together like a spider web. CranioSacral is an energy-based therapy using light contact like acupressure. There is no physical manipulation to the bones and tissues. While specific attention is given to the cranium, spine and sacrum, treatment is not limited to these areas due to the way the body is connected.

Practitioners are trained to first assess the equine client’s movement, posture and soft tissue. Hands-on techniques applied help to release restrictions throughout the body’s musculoskeletal and nervous system, restoring postural balance and fluidity of the biomechanics.

The Equine Skull

The equine skull is a giant jigsaw puzzle made of 26 individual



Student Patsy Bartrum of the UK, practicing CranioSacral hands-on techniques in a workshop. Even though specific focus is given to the cranium, spine and sacrum, practitioners address the whole body.
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A horsemanship makeover, tack changes, possibly dental work, and Equine CranioSacral therapy are needed here, for starters. These extreme and unnatural pressures on the jaw/ mandible and elsewhere do damage to the muscles of mastication, the TMJ, and more, and contribute to biomechanical imbalances overall.
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plates of bone joined together by sutures. Sutures act like joints between the cranial bones and are designed to help disperse the energy from an impact to the skull. All bone is healthy living tissue and has both a blood supply and fatty tissue, giving it a degree



Disarticulating the skull of the young horse clearly shows the individual plates of bone and the "sutures", demonstrating that the bones are not fused together. Sutures act like joints and are very well designed for impact, and these bones have a natural pliability; however, when head trauma occurs, the bones can become jammed into each other and the horse can display neurological conditions. CranioSacral therapy focuses on bringing balance throughout this structure, and the rest of the body.
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of natural pliability. The skull of the newborn foal is made up of more individual plates and develops until 5-6 years of age. Any external pressures, like pull backs or compression from trauma, on the young horse's skull will have long term ramifications and deep effects. Especially, when the compression is left untreated, it can result in behavior issues, spookiness, TMJ issues, collection issues, or other difficulties in work, to name a few.



This horse clearly shows many indications of discomfort and pain from the pressures being exerted on the cranium: tightness in the masseter muscle, poll out of balance, compression to nasal bone affecting the upper airway, and distress and discomfort in the eye. Devices such as these create severe pressures on the head, nerves, and the soft tissues by using leverage and by restricting needed movement. When the mouth is held closed by the noseband, its inner structures, the TMJ, and the atlas/ upper neck do not work properly, thus impeding movement and contributing to innumerable problems.
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If there were any one reason for horse owners to use CranioSacral treatment, it would be after dental work. Dental work IS a very important component of equine health and should be regularly performed by a qualified professional. However, the speculum, which is a device used to safely hold the mouth open (an unnatural position for the horse), does not give if a horse tries to close his mouth, and the pressures on the bones of the skull can be extreme. It is essential to

release the speculum often during the dental procedures to rest the jaw and head, and the speculum should be opened only as much and as long a time as absolutely necessary. Some of the instruments used, such as power tools or certain hand instruments, also put unhealthy pressures on the skull. Compensation patterns in mastication are often a consequence, which leads to the need for more dentistry, so CranioSacral work should always be performed after dentistry to bring balance back to the muscles and bones of the cranium.

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Throughout the life of most horses, many pressures are regularly applied to the cranium, from tight fitting nosebands, pressures from bits, improperly fitting bridles or halters, and dental procedures.

Whether pressures are applied from devices or injury/ trauma occurs to the bones of the skull, their natural positions become disorganized and out of balanced alignment. The bones of the skull can get compressed and the sutures jammed, affecting the horse's neurology, muscle and nerve function, sinuses, balance, TMJ function, gait movement, head carriage, poll flexion and overall biomechanics.

Treatment

How do you know when your horse needs or may benefit from CranioSacral therapy?

CranioSacral is used with success in the treatment of:

- Headshaking
- Facial nerve paralysis
- Imbalances of the TMJ and the muscles of mastication
- Head traumas and injuries
- Behavior problems



Left: Preventive care goes a long way. Before CranioSacral treatment, this horse's posture gives us many clues to the musculoskeletal imbalances and compensation patterns occurring: stiff stifles, long back, tucked-under hind end making it difficult for hind end propulsion, putting much stress on the fore. Right: Notice the difference in posture (indicating the horse is more comfortable) after the 4th CranioSacral treatment: ears forward, hind end under the horse, softer in the stifle and shortened through the top line. This indicates more efficient movement/ biomechanics. Hoof care also needs to be addressed. Photos copyright Maureen Rogers



Left: Before CranioSacral treatment. This horse shows imbalances in the stifle, stiffness in the neck and poll, some may consider him to be long backed. Many of the issues he is displaying are thought to be conformational, but aren't. Right: After CranioSacral treatments. Ahhhhhh! When the body is brought back into balance, it is softer in the low back, poll and stifles. We see most of his issues are actually postural (not conformational), affecting him musculoskeletally. Photos copyright Maureen Rogers

- Low back and stifle/ hock joint problems
- Cribbing
- Biomechanical issues

Indications that your horse may be a good candidate for CranioSacral treatment include:

- Bucking
- Lameness
- Difficulty in making transitions, holding the canter and leads
- Feels flat in work
- Difficulty with respiration
- Headaches
- Grinding teeth or difficulty chewing food

The **body loves balance**. It will try to create balance in an imbalanced state via compensation patterns. These compensations cost the body over time and aid in the breakdown of joint function and musculoskeletal health. Many times people use devices to correct these imbalances, which is like putting a band aid on to correct the body and movement, which only creates more imbalance. Often, in the long term, behavior issues result. Compensation patterns exist for all equine athletes!

Any horse can benefit from CranioSacral work because all horses experience regular pressures to the cranium throughout their lives. Clearly, these pressures on the skull affect bone growth and position, and contribute to compensation patterns in muscles of the TMJ, its function, and mastication patterns, which influence the overall biomechanics of the horse. Retaining or reinstating the integrity of skeletal and muscular systems is vital for any horse, especially the equine athlete, for health, longevity, comfort, wellbeing and performance!

It is important to work with professionally trained Equine CranioSacral practitioner. Equine CranioSacral does not replace traditional veterinarian medicine or care.

Case Study: CranioSacral Treatment Successful in Headshaking

Hektor, a TB gelding, raced successfully for the first four years of his life. He was sold in the autumn of 1990, age 11. Unknown to his new owners, he was a headshaker. His headshaking was first noticed in the spring of 1991. Hektor was diagnosed as having seasonal allergies and being light sensitive. He suffered a head trauma with compression to the right nasal bone, frontal bone, sphenoid and maxilla. To make things worse, in 1995 he had another head injury, losing his two front incisors, only exacerbat-



Hektor, successfully rehabilitated from headshaking with CranioSacral therapy. He lived the last 8 years of his life headshaking free!
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Maureen Rogers

ing his initial condition. Swelling of the tissues that line the inside of the upper airway affected the head injury. After his second head injury, he shook his head 24 hours a day. His headshaking was so severe, it rendered him unrideable.

Treatments tried prior to CranioSacral therapy included antihistamines, steroids, chiropractic and acupuncture, none of which provided much relief. In 2000, 10 years after the onset of the condition, CranioSacral treatments began.

A significant change was noticeable after the first CranioSacral treatment. After the second treatment, the headshaking nearly stopped. After five treatments, Hektor was free of headshaking symptoms. He remained free of symptoms for the last 8 years of his life. Hektor received regular CranioSacral treatments to maintain his overall balance and wellbeing. 🍀

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About the author:

Maureen Rogers is a pioneer in the field of Equine CranioSacral therapy and the founder of Equine CranioSacral Workshops, a US-based company that trains others in these groundbreaking, noninvasive methods. She travels internationally for teaching, lectures and private consultations and works in conjunction with veterinarians, equine dentists, trainers, physiotherapists, and horse owners, who seek out her expertise in Equine CranioSacral work, biomechanics of the performance horse and rehab therapy skills. Rogers is the producer of the 15-minute DVD, *Hope for Headshakers*, currently (but for a limited time) available to view free on YouTube.

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